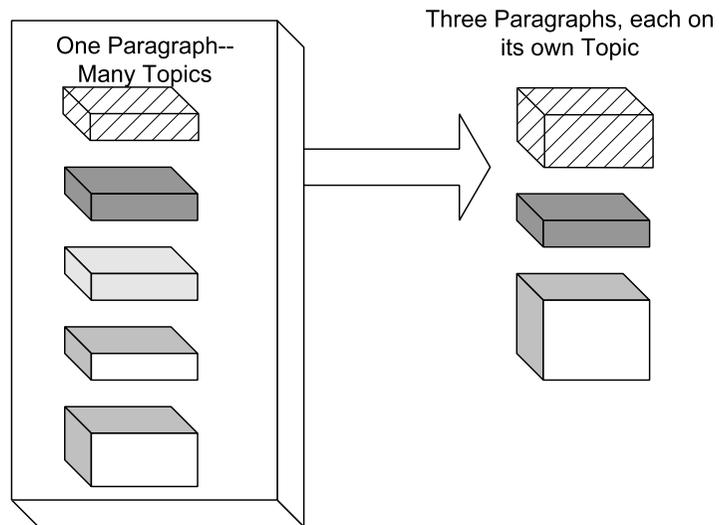


Design Each Paragraph Around One Main Idea



BACKGROUND |

Make each paragraph distinct

Paragraphs set off chunks of prose visually. Since each paragraph looks like a different object, write it that way.

On the Web, people see much less text than a book page can show, so each paragraph seems more prominent. Also, on the Web, users are looking harder for clues about the content of each object before deciding to read, so they tend to expect that each new paragraph will offer a different point.

Do what your guests expect. Organize each paragraph around a different purpose.

Answer a particular question

Each paragraph (or series of short paragraphs) should answer a different question from the user, providing one main type of information. Think catalog. The user asks a series of questions and the site responds with a series of paragraphs.

What’s the name of this product?	Product name
What good is it?	Feature (and related benefit)
What gear does it work with?	Compatible hardware
Is it available?	Availability flag
How much does it cost?	Pricing

One point per paragraph.

—Bricklin, 1998

If you devote each paragraph to a particular purpose, you fit into an object-oriented world, where the tags indicate the purpose of the content and its place within the larger structure. Think of something you’ve just written and ask yourself what kind of tags might delimit the paragraphs, answering user questions such as:

What does this mean?	Tag: Definition
What is your unique proposition?	Tag: Pitch
Can you prove that?	Tag: Evidence
Can you give me some numbers?	Tag: Statistics table
What’s the general rule?	Tag: Guideline
What do I do next?	Tag: Procedure step

Create one sentence that sums up the paragraph’s point

For most readers, a paragraph seems to hang together as a unit if it includes a sentence that states the gist of the paragraph—the core point.

Readers will expect to find in each paragraph... a sentence that will be the logical, argumentative, expository center, a sentence that you could send as the telegram capturing your central idea. (Williams, 1990)

Make all the sentences coherent

To reinforce the main point of a paragraph, sprinkle other sentences with terms that a reader would normally associate with your main idea. Then organize those themes into one or more sequences, building toward the end of the paragraph.

Readers expect a paragraph to contain at least one set of words

A paragraph is in fact a whole composition in miniature.

—J. G. R. McElroy, quoted in
Young, Becker, and Pike,
Rhetoric: Discovery and Change

that are conceptually related to your main idea. For instance, if your main point is that recording the exact location of fossils helps archeologists determine the chronological history of a dig, then readers expect to see words such as *bones*, *shovels*, *levels*, and *time periods*. Because these subordinate topics are associated with the main idea, readers see the paragraph as holding together.

But don't multiply synonyms for the same subject. If you really mean *bones*, use *bones* over and over. Repetition signals that you are still discussing the same subject, which may seem boring to you, but eliminates confusion. Too many thesaurus terms make the reader wonder whether you are talking about subtly different subjects, making the paragraph explode.

Proceed from familiar to unfamiliar topics

As one sentence moves toward the next, put familiar information into the first part of the sentence, and launch into the new idea, the unexpected twist, the interesting turn—at the end. Then start the next sentence with that new idea. By creating a chain of familiar ideas leading up to new ones, you propel the reader forward from the known to the unknown.

A reader normally expects coherence and takes it for granted that there is a connection between sentences that occur sequentially in a speech or in writing.
(Quirk, 1972)

Look at your paragraph as a structure

As you write, sense the way your paragraph is shaping up. Let your attention move from the individual word to the whole sentence, from the currently unfolding sentence to the purpose of the paragraph—so you work from the bottom up—and from the top down. The more you're aware of the structure of the paragraph and its goal, the more your language will reveal that overarching shape.

After you've written a draft of a paragraph or two, take another look and edit to surface the patterns of thought that tie one sentence to the next. Perhaps you have been moving from the old to the new, from the problem to the solution, from the most common

Every idea is an incitement. It offers itself for belief, and if believed, it is acted on unless some other belief outweighs it or some failure of energy stifles the movement at its birth.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes,
Gitlow vs N.Y., 1925

*Ideas are, in truth, forces.
Infinite, too, is the power of
personality. A union of the two
always makes history.*

—Henry James,
on Charles W. Eliot

*Ideas won't keep. Something must
be done about them.*

—Alfred North Whitehead,
Dialogues

to the least. Any organization will do, as long as you insert words that signal that structure, such as *first*, *next*, and *finally*. You're increasing the drama by polishing the story.

Paragraphs have plots, patterns that organize sentences into a whole unit. (Young, Becker, and Pike, 1970)

Simplify by throwing out other ideas

If you really want to get two points across, put them in separate paragraphs. In the blurry, hectic experience of skimming through your text, people guess what your paragraph is about, based on the opening, and if that topic does not interest them, they move on. Even if they do decide to read, they may miss the second point because they are focusing on the original idea and overlooking anything else.

Each paragraph should contain one main idea. Use a second paragraph for a second idea, since users tend to skip any second point as they scan over the paragraph. (Sun, 2000)

Press Enter to start a new paragraph. Use lots of short paragraphs, each dealing with a distinct topic—that is best for e-mail, Web pages, or discussions.

EXAMPLES

Before

We balance out the acidity, thickness, and taste, when we put together a coffee blend for a mild, bold, rich, or casual impression. We bring together beans from different countries, each with its own flavor. Of course, sometimes we serve coffees that are “single-origin” because all the beans come from one country, in one season. We think these beans are tangy enough to stand on their own. So you can see that we brew both single-origin and

After

We serve both **single-origin** and **blended** coffees. How come? Like grapes, coffee beans change their aroma, acidity, body, and flavor from year to year, and from one climate to another.

We brew some coffees that are “single-origin” because all the beans come from **one country** in one season. We think these beans are tangy enough to stand on their own.

blended coffees. Why do we do that? Like grapes, coffee beans change their aroma, acidity, body, and flavor from year to year, and from one climate to another.

Before

Recovering from wounds in World War I, Moholy-Nagy asked himself whether he had the privilege of becoming a typographer, sculptor, or other kind of creative person just for himself, when everyone's skills were needed to solve the problems of simple survival. No more subjective painting, he decided. In 1919 he said, "The personal indulgence of creating art has contributed nothing to the happiness of the masses." Moholy-Nagy came to believe in design for social change.

Before

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And we serve blends of coffees bringing together beans from **different countries**, each with its own flavor. In this way, we balance out the acidity, thickness, and taste, for a mild, bold, rich, or casual impression.

After

Moholy-Nagy came to believe in design for **social change**. Recovering from wounds in World War I, he asked himself whether he had the privilege of becoming an artist for himself, when everyone's skills were needed to solve the problems of simple survival. No more subjective art, he decided. In 1919 he said, "The personal indulgence of creating art has contributed nothing to the happiness of the masses."

After

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- 1) Return the product in good condition, including any accompanying disks, books, and batteries. (Please use the original box, if you still have it.)
- 2) Use the Return Address Sticker that came with the original package, so we can credit your account. Or call us to get the correct address and code so you get credit. (505 555-1212).

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...

TO HAVE FUN

How well does this guideline apply?

People out for entertainment sometimes like long tangled paragraphs, enjoying the rich prose, without restlessly asking, "What's the point?"

TO LEARN

Critical. One idea at a time helps the mind absorb the argument.

TO ACT

Critical. Each instruction deserves its own paragraph, and explanations belong in their own paragraphs, quite separate.

TO BE AWARE

If simplicity is a virtue for you, follow the guideline.

TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE

In e-mail and discussion groups, focusing each paragraph on a single idea helps people see what you mean. Nonstop rants, without paragraphing, are just self-indulgent.

See: Bricklin (1998), Bush and Campbell (1995), Dragga and Gong (1989), Morkes & Nielsen (1997), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b), Quirk (1972), Sammons (1999), Sun (2000), Weiss (1991), Williams (1990), Young, Becker, and Pike (1970).

For your review only.

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